

ON TEACHING THE *OEDIPUS REX*

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Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (also known as *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, or affectionately as the *OT*) is considered by many to be the best of the thirty-two surviving Greek tragedies, and has been a popular choice for secondary school students to read in translation in preparation for exams like the VCE. This article is intended to be a refresher for teachers who are helping new readers (including tertiary students) derive pleasure and meaning from the *OT*, whether they are teaching the text for the first time, or for the twentieth time. By focusing on the general themes of fate, vision/knowledge, *sôphrosunê*, and women, and discussing how they are relevant in the context of the *OT* and in comparison with other Greek classics, some possible readings of the play will emerge that will hopefully stimulate students' curiosity and encourage intelligent discussion among them.¹

Fate

'Fate' is inevitably the most popular topic that students will latch on to when discussing the Oedipus story. But when they begin to grapple with it, they should be aware that 'fate' has various shades of meaning in Greek literature. First of all, it is Death. All mortals are fated to die; there is no escape. In the *Iliad*, when heroes talk about the fate (*moros* or *moira*) of mortals, they are usually talking about death, not about a sequence of events that has to happen a certain way. This view of fate abounds in Greek tragedy, too. The famous '*polla ta deina*' ode of Sophocles' *Antigone* (lines 331-75) sums up this point beautifully. Beginning with the words, 'Marvels are many, and none is more marvellous than man,' one of the messages of the ode is that despite man's greatness, death is his lot.² Human beings are nature's most wonderful creature because we till the soil, domesticate animals, sail the seas, set up laws, cure diseases with medicines—in short, we create civilisation. But the ode makes clear that there is one thing we cannot cure: Hades (*Antigone* 361), or death, which everyone must endure.

Fate can also mean misfortune, or a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*), sometimes personified as vengeful goddesses, the Kêres (whom the chorus of *OT* invoke to punish the murderer of Laius at line 472), or as a more vague spirit (*daimôn*, often translated 'divinity' or 'fortune'). Life is always full of misfortune, no matter who you are. After Oedipus has learned the awful truth, the chorus sing to themselves, 'What man, what man bears a happiness that is more than just a seeming and, after seeming, a falling away?' (*OT* 1189-92). They then invoke Oedipus and his fate (*daimôn*) as the pattern (*paradeigma*) for this eternal truth. In the last line of the play, the chorus reiterate the point, to count no man happy (*olbizein*) till he has died without pain (1528-30).³ The implication is that every human life is fated to undergo alternating

1 When quoting Greek words, I have italicised them and transliterated them into Roman letters. The symbol ê = eta, ô = omega.

2 Line numbers for quotations of tragedy refer to the original Greek text. All translations are my own.

3 Some scholars, H.D.F. Kitto among them, considered this choral rejoinder spurious.

misfortune and good fortune; if you're happy today, you might be miserable tomorrow; and if you're having problems today, things will always get sunnier in the future; that is the fate of human existence. It is only when a person dies in happiness that he or she can be called 'happy', because there is no time left for fortune to reverse itself again. Students who have read Book 1 of Herodotus will easily pick up the same message in the story of Croesus of Lydia, the richest man in the world; when he asked the visiting Solon who was the most *olbios* person he knew, Solon warned him:

If a man will end his life well,...he is worthy to be called *olbios*. But until he dies, do not call him '*olbios*,' but 'fortunate' (*eutuchês*)....He who continues to possess the greatest number of these (advantages) and then reaches the end of his life agreeably (*eucharistôs*), that man alone, O king, in my opinion, rightly bears the name (of '*olbios*'). But in everything one must focus on the end, on what way it will turn out; for in many cases when God has given men a glimpse of happiness, he has then overturned them root and branch.

(Herodotus 1.32)

The Solon of Herodotus plays on the double meaning of the Greek word *olbios* as both 'rich' and 'happy', and teaches Croesus a valuable lesson about the ambiguity of words—a lesson Croesus fails to learn, as will become clear later. When the chorus of the *OT* sings that no one should be reckoned *olbizein* (to be *olbios*) before he dies, they could just as easily be making the same pun; for was not Oedipus, as ruler of Thebes and the reputed son of the Corinthian king, a man of great wealth and power?

Finally, what we in the modern world usually associate with the word 'fate' are specific events and predictions, such as, 'You will be killed by your own son', 'You will kill your father and marry your mother', 'So-and-so are destined to die at each other's hands'. It is as if there were some grand movie script in the universe that we are all reciting, and we make our entrances and exits in some pre-determined way. Some of you readers might even wonder whether you've been 'fated' to read this article today, and that it was always my 'fate' to write this article for this journal.

Interestingly enough, fate doesn't usually work in a pre-determined fashion in Greek literature. Usually destiny is given in terms of choices and conditionals. In the *Iliad*, Achilles is fated to have *either* a long life with no reputation, *or* a short life with every-lasting fame (9.411-16), and he eventually chooses the latter. In the narrative of the Trojan war, Troy will be captured *if* the Greeks manage to use the bow of Philoctetes; *if not*, Troy will not fall (Sophocles' *Philoctetes* 68f.); as it turns out, the Greeks get the bow, and win. In Herodotus, Croesus is told by the oracles of Delphi and Amphiaraus that *if* he attacks the Persians, he will destroy a mighty empire (1.53); but Croesus has the choice whether or not to proceed (and he would have been better off if he hadn't). Sophocles' *OT* is therefore quite unique in showing how two generations—Laius and Oedipus—try to escape a 'fate' which was *not* given as a choice. Or, to be more precise, the characters in the play recall the oracular messages as predicting a future with no alternative options. Jocasta says that Laius was told that he would be killed by his own son—no choice (*OT* 711-14). Oedipus recalls how he was warned by Apollo that he would kill his father and marry his mother—no choice (790-93). Both men tried to take steps to avoid this fate: Laius exposed his son, Oedipus ran away from what he thought was his home. We learn that the prophesied fates of Laius and Oedipus came true, but

without them realising it. Furthermore, the *OT* does not dramatise Oedipus in the act of fulfilling his destiny. At the beginning of the play, he has already committed the crimes he was fated to commit; the play is therefore less about parricide and incest than about Oedipus realising an awful truth about himself: that the fate he tried to avoid is inescapable because it has *already* happened for him.

Who set this fate in motion? Some god? The play gives no clear answers, but the oracle of Apollo receives much blame from the cast. It was Apollo who gave Laius and Oedipus their oracles that prophesied doom, and it was Apollo who set the plague on Thebes. This is yet another aspect of fate: the anger of a god. In many Greek tragedies, divinities release their anger on mortals who offend them. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus destroys Pentheus, who denied his divinity; in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite brings about the death of Hippolytus, who had abstained from her rites; these mortals are fated to die because the gods are against them, but (in perfect instances of dramatic irony) the mortals don't know it. In the *OT*, it is not certain whether any god really has it in for Oedipus, since the gods never appear in person in this play—itself a significant omission, since Sophocles was perfectly capable of dramatising divinities on stage (cf. his *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*). Oedipus, for his part, unabashedly blames Apollo. After he blinds himself, he sings: 'Apollo it was, Apollo, friends, who brought to completion these misfortunes, my unfortunate sufferings. Yet no one else's hand struck them [i.e., my eyes], but I did it, miserable me' (*OT* 1329-31). But for all Oedipus' eagerness to blame the god, an audience should remain doubtful; Apollo did not contrive to put Laius and Oedipus on the same road at the same time. Nonetheless, many readers have taken this line to indicate that some things are not fated. Oedipus' blinding of himself appears an act of free-will, something that the god did not predict; yet somehow Teiresias knew things would end this way (454-57), so to some extent even Oedipus' self-maiming fulfils what has already been predicted.

Why should we care about fate? Why should readers ask these questions? I would argue that considerations of fate lead to larger questions. As soon as we accept that Oedipus was 'fated' to commit parricide and incest, we need to ask ourselves whether he was 'responsible'. If one has no choice in doing something, is one ethically responsible? If one commits a crime without knowing it, is one liable? In other plays, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus argues that he is innocent because he did not know he was killing his father and marrying his mother when he committed those acts (*OC* 271-74); yet the gravity of the crimes is so horrible that it pollutes him wherever he goes. In *OT*, however, Oedipus is more concerned about self-punishment and insists on being led away from Thebes, or killed, or even thrown into the sea, where none of his former Theban subjects may see him (1410-12). Interestingly enough, he is not afraid of letting the chorus touch him, for, as he puts it, 'no one of mortals but I am capable of bearing my misfortunes' (1414f.). Apparently his *miasma* is not communicable by touch, but is it by sight? Creon wants Oedipus out of sight, too, and even asks Oedipus to spare showing his unveiled pollution to the Sun (1426f.), drawing further attention to the fact that Oedipus' bloodied mask is not covered, but stands out in the full glory of its gore. Creon, however, wants to lead Oedipus back into the house rather than exile him, since, as he puts it, 'It is pious for kin alone to see and hear the misfortunes of kin' (1430f.). One of the implications is that if Oedipus goes wandering around the world, the scandal of what has happened in Thebes will run rampant; Creon is worried about protecting the family's 'dirty laundry', so to speak, by keeping Oedipus confined. But Oedipus insists that he wants to be exiled, yet his attempts to manipulate Creon into permitting it fail

(1515ff.). Nowhere in the end of the *OT* does Oedipus ruminate about his innocence, nor is he interested in a deep moral probing of his guilt. Instead, he accepts a kind of surface guilt, speaking of his self-blinding as an appropriate act—a fitting punishment—given that, in the afterlife, he would never have been able to bring himself to look upon the spirits of his father and mother, whom he had so wronged, with intact eyes (1371-73). Furthermore, regardless of his having committed the crimes in innocence, he describes the deeds (*erga*) that he did against them as deserving worse than hanging (1374). He leaves the greater conundrums of his moral guilt or innocence for a another time, another play.

Vision and Knowledge

For students reading Greek tragedy in translation, it is worth teaching them an important feature of ancient Greek: that the words for ‘he knows’ (*oide*) and ‘he saw’ (*eide*) differ by one letter. Greek tragedy as a genre is rife with the interplay between seeing and knowing; in particular, nothing violent ever happens on the Greek stage, but a reader or spectator is told about it and encouraged to visualise it in his or her head. The blinding of Oedipus and the hanging of Jocasta in the *OT* are never seen by the audience, yet the audience knows of them. Seeing with the mind is theatrically more satisfying than seeing with the eyes.

At an even greater level, it is through seeing a drama that we come to know about ourselves. Froma Zeitlin’s theory about ‘playing the other,’ though originally written in the context of performing gender, is applicable to all types of otherness in drama:

The male characters whose sufferings are the most stringent and reductive of self are also allowed to discover the internal strength for transcending them. In the end, tragedy arrives at closures that generally reassert male, often paternal, structures of authority, but before that the work of the drama is to open up the masculine view of the universe. It typically does so, as we have seen, through energizing the theatrical resources of the female and concomitantly enervating the male as the price of initiating actor and spectator into new and unsettling modes of feeling, seeing, and knowing.

(Zeitlin, ‘Playing the Other’, 86f.)

That is to say, the ancient male spectator needed to undergo an alternative experience—for example, witnessing and empathising with a great man’s sufferings, or with a fictional woman’s point of view—in order to re-assess and understand his own sense of self. The theatre—the ‘seeing place’—as an institution was a means for men to embrace the ‘other’ by viewing or performing it in the public arena. By watching a mythical Oedipus crash from the heights of power to the depths of suffering, and by believing it to be real, we come away from the experience of drama with a wider knowledge of the possibilities of change in that shared human existence of which we are all a part.

Such is the twin relationship of vision and knowledge at the macro level; in the microcosm of the *OT* as well, physical sight and metaphysical sight are everywhere contrasted. The one who can see, sees nothing (Oedipus); the one who can’t see, sees more clearly (Teiresias, and Oedipus once he is blind). The Oedipus who had physical sight has been living a life of self-deception. Who is Oedipus? He thinks he is a Corinthian, son of Polybus and Merope,

husband of Jocasta, and tyrant of Thebes; but he is really a Theban, son of Laius, husband of his mother, and heir to Laius through parricide. This is the ultimate irony of Oedipus' case: he thinks he is the ultimate outsider (the *tyrannos* or usurper who interrupts a dynasty), but he is really the ultimate insider (the legitimate blood heir), but that dynastic transition from father to son was accomplished through murder. Teiresias, the blind prophet, sees this truth, and says so explicitly to Oedipus (413ff.); Oedipus sees only a disabled old man spouting angry words unworthy of credit. Yet when Oedipus blinds himself after discovering the truth, he becomes prophetic like Teiresias; he can see that he has something in store. He surmises, 'Yet this much I know: that neither sickness nor any other thing will carry me off. For I would not have been saved from death if not for some strange evil thing. But let my fate (*moira*) go wherever it will' (1455-58). With the more accurate vision that comes with physical darkness, Oedipus hints that his story is not over; if this were a film in the cinema, we would expect a sequel.⁴

But where does this structuralist approach lead? It's all very nice to track the conflicts between the opposing concepts of vision and knowledge, and conclude with a quantitative division. But what's the message behind the dichotomy? What meaning can it offer? I would suggest that the complex relationship between vision and knowledge raises the very important question: are we any different from Oedipus and Jocasta? Are there truths about ourselves that we cannot see now, but we might some time—in the space of day—realise to our horror? And what can we do about it? Do things happen to us by accident in this world, or is some divine plan in operation, and can we ever know it? Should we consider ourselves responsible for the mistakes we make, or do we have the option of blaming some evil demon which makes us do them?

Unlike us, Sophocles had recourse to the Greek custom of prophecy and oracles within organised religious cults, and allowed his characters to shift much of the blame onto those untouchable institutions. We in the twenty-first century can read our horoscope in the newspaper every day, or we can consult a personal psychic (by mobile, on-line, or even in person); but we typically don't blame our psychic when the bad things they predict actually happen. The characters in the *OT*, however, have a very intimate yet strained relationship (dare we call it love/hate?) with prophecy and its accuracy. The prophecy given to Oedipus about murdering his father and marrying his mother was, as I stated above, peculiar in that it was not expressed as a choice; that does not mean, however, that it was not open to multiple meanings. Oracles in Greek literature are notoriously confusing, and always open to interpretation and the exercise of specialised knowledge. In the Herodotean cases of the Delphic oracle to Croesus about defeating a great empire (Book 1), and of the oracle to the Athenians about the wooden wall (Book 7), authority was to be found not in the oracle itself, but in the person (Croesus and Themistocles) who gave it the best and most expedient interpretation. Unfortunately for Croesus, he was wrong; he assumed that the great empire to be defeated was the Persians he was attacking, when instead, it was his own empire that was defeated. Though Solon's discourse on *olbios* demonstrated that words are by nature ambiguous, Croesus had not taken the point. Like Oedipus, Croesus blamed Apollo for giving a bad oracle, but received the sobering (and quite hilarious) response that it was Croesus' own fault for not having gone back to the oracle in the beginning and asking explicitly which great

4 Arguably, a sequel is exactly what *Oedipus at Colonus* is, albeit written some two decades later. The *OT* dates (at a best guess) to around 425 BCE; the *OC* was produced posthumously in 401, about five years after Sophocles died.

empire had been meant—and at any rate, Apollo had delayed the fall of Croesus’ empire for three years beyond the allotted time, so Croesus should be grateful (Herodotus 1.91). If any of your personal psychics should talk to you like this, I’d sue.

The *OT* actually begins with the interpretation of an oracle, and significantly it is Creon—the man who will benefit most from Oedipus’ downfall—who suggests that when Apollo spoke of driving a pollution (*miasma*) from the land (97), he must have meant finding the murderers of Laius (106f.). Oedipus, too, tries his hand at oracular exegesis later when he supposes he has figuratively accomplished the murder of his father, in that Polybus (who he thinks is his father) died of grief at Oedipus’ absence (969f.). Jocasta argues (by her own experience) that oracles are never right, and by extension prophecy itself is untrustworthy, and seers like Teiresias should be ignored (707-10, 857f.). Oedipus suspects Teiresias of colluding with Creon, implying that prophets are people too and can be bribed into giving misleading predictions (385ff.); the Teiresias of Sophocles’ *Antigone* receives similar abuse (*Antigone* 1055). These anxieties in the *OT* reflect a genuine concern about the corruptibility of prophets in the real world of Athenian politics, inasmuch as oracles (particularly that at Delphi), in addition to being very wealthy, played a crucial role in inter-Hellenic policy through their authoritative pronouncements. Thucydides records that the Corcyreans were willing to let the oracle at Delphi (as well as cities in the Peloponnese) arbitrate their dispute with Corinth over the occupation of Epidamnus (1.28); the Corinthians effectively prevented negotiations by demanding that the Corcyreans leave Epidamnus first, which they were obviously unwilling to do. One wonders whether Corinth’s reluctance to accept arbitration was due to its distrust of Delphi’s loyalties, or its lack of confidence in finding a person who could interpret the oracle convincingly in Corinth’s favour.

Nonetheless, in the world of the *OT*, when it comes to distrusting oracles, Jocasta is wrong. Oedipus is wrong, too. In tragedy, oracles always come true, and Teiresias is always (though annoying so) right. Is it important that both Oedipus and Jocasta are wrong, and that divine forces (Apollo’s oracle and Teiresias) can see things they cannot? I think so; it adds greatly to the pathos of the play to witness two people be so confident in their self-identity and yet—in true Sophoclean dramatic irony—be so blatantly wrong. For the great riddle solver that he is, Oedipus fails to unravel his own disastrous past, composed of as many monstrous parts as the Sphinx was herself. For Oedipus and Jocasta, there really is no escape from the truth of who they are, and they have no one to blame with any sort of satisfaction. As we saw above, Oedipus verbally blames Apollo, but that brings neither relief nor justification. Part of the message from the *OT* is a sobering reminder that mortals should not assume they always have control over their lives.

Sophrosune

Like fate, *sôphrosunê* is a common buzzword in reading Greek literature in translation, and it has a variety of meanings. In the *Odyssey*, it is discretion, as when Telemachus is said to have the *sôphrosunê* not to reveal his father Odysseus’s secret plans (23.30). In Plato, *sôphrosunê* is self-control against physical pleasures and desires (e.g., *Republic* 430d). Thucydides uses the word to mean wise precaution, such as the *sôphrosunê* that the Corcyreans thought they were observing when they did not make alliances with other cities, in case it meant involving themselves in risks of their allies’ choosing (1.32.4); and

Thucydides elsewhere allows *sôphrosunê* to signify a moderate government (8.64.5). For women, *sôphrosunê* invariably refers to chastity and sexual fidelity to one's husband (as in Euripides' *Hippolytus*).

In the *OT*, even though the specific word *sôphrosunê* is never used, the concept of discretion and moderation—or rather, the lack of it—nonetheless pervades the drama. Oedipus is depicted as a very immoderate person, rash in his assumptions about people and their motives. He assumes that Creon and Teiresias are plotting against him (380ff.). His story of how he killed an old man at a crossroads (801-13) reveals a personality quick to anger: the old man and his carriage tried to run Oedipus off the road; Oedipus did not turn the other cheek, but attacked the driver. The old man hit Oedipus on the head, and Oedipus responded...how? By walking away? By wrestling the old man to the ground, disarming him, and then reasoning with him? No; Oedipus killed him, and in fact killed everyone in the old man's train (813). Many readers of the *OT* have difficulty sympathising with Oedipus because he is a genuinely unlikeable person. This is not accidental; Sophocles deliberately creates a character who is hot-tempered and quick to judge, in order to encourage an audience to ponder the important question: do people deserve their misfortune? Do bad people get their just desserts? And the reverse: if you suffer, does that mean you deserved it?

Some readers might like to think that Oedipus deserves his sufferings because he is an arrogant bastard. Some even go so far as to argue that his arrogance (or some other form of *hubris*) is Oedipus' tragic flaw that causes his downfall. However, this pseudo-Aristotelian approach—the assumption that every tragedy must have a tragic hero with a tragic flaw—is, despite its ubiquity, extremely unhelpful in reading Greek tragedy. When Aristotle in his *Poetics* expresses his opinion that the best tragic plots represent a prosperous man's reversal of fortune due to some *hamartia*, he is not referring to a moral 'flaw' or 'sin' (a meaning that the word *hamartia* earned in later centuries), but rather to an 'error' or 'mistake in judgment.' In fact, Aristotle makes a clear distinction that a reversal of fortune is more pleasing if it is caused *not* by vice (*kakia*) or badness (*mochthêria*), but by error (*Poetics* 1453a.9)⁵ And although Aristotle thinks highly of the *OT*, he does not explicitly state that the play even conforms to his theory regarding *hamartia*; he merely says that Oedipus is an example of a famous and prosperous personage, the kind whose downfall is most dramatically effective (*Poetics* 1453a.20).

Any suggestion that Oedipus' arrogance is a tragic flaw that leads to his destruction is hard to substantiate. Sophocles could have easily created an Oedipus who is the nicest person in the world, and he could still have ended up blind and widowed at the end of the play, as long as he was stubborn enough to insist on knowing the truth. Since Oedipus has already committed his crimes before the play begins, his suffering comes from bringing those crimes out into the open, so in a sense, Oedipus' suffering is of his own making. If he were not so insistent on finding out the truth, he could have lived in blissful ignorance forever; but being insistent on knowing the truth and being arrogant are not the same thing. The former has to do with persistence in solving a riddle, the latter with treating people disrespectfully. The characterisation of Oedipus as disagreeable therefore complicates our understanding of his

5 The best example of this in my mind is Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which Creon is finally persuaded by Teiresias to release Antigone from captivity and bury the body of Polyneices. But Creon decides to do these two things in a particular order: first Polyneices, then Antigone. That is his error in judgment, his *hamartia*; had he gone to release Antigone first, he would have reached her in time to prevent her suicide, and Haemon would not have killed himself over her body, nor Eurydice stabbed herself at the news of Haemon's death.

peripeteia. Sophocles is the master of forcing an audience, by the end of his dramas, to feel pity and sympathy with unlikeable characters with overbearing attitudes;⁶ he achieves the same thing in his *Antigone*, which ends with Creon—surely the one man in Greek drama whose dictatorial smugness earns the least amount of warmth from the audience—wallowing in the paralysing awareness that he has caused the suicides of his own niece, son, and wife. If Aristotle got one thing right in his theories on tragedy, it was that the change from prosperity to adversity for a man of high birth who is ‘not eminent in goodness (*aretê*) and justness (*dikaïosunê*)—i.e., midway (*metaxu*) between the extremes of completely good and completely bad—is dramatically pleasing (*Poetics* 1453a.9). Such is the case of Oedipus.

Should it surprise us that Oedipus is unlikeable? After all, he is a king, in a play performed at a time when Athens was no longer ruled by kings, but had for generations been ruled by a democracy, by men who spoke with an equal voice (or at least, liked to think that they did). The heroes of tragedy are kings and princes and queens of a mythological past, extraordinary individuals by nature, looked upon as father figures by the people they rule. Certainly the men of the chorus of the *OT* turn to Oedipus for help and place their unquestioning trust in him at first. The great responsibilities that mythical kings and heroes have for the greater community make them susceptible to bigger problems. Choruses and other non-noble characters often aver that it is great people who suffer great things, as a sign of their greatness (cf. the nurse in Euripides’ *Medea* 127-30). The people of Greek tragedy are not ordinary; they are not at all like the average male adult Athenian citizen in the original intended audience of the 5th century BCE. That is not to say that we cannot expect tragic men and women to have explicable reactions and behave in an understandable manner. Part of the intrigue of tragedy is the fine line between the actor’s role as a caricature of myth, and that same role as a believable human character. Those moments when we suspend our disbelief—when readers genuinely visualise Oedipus getting angry at Teiresias, rather than simply reading words on a page—are the most precious moments in reading tragedy in translation. Nonetheless, the great personages of Greek tragedy are not role models for an audience, ancient or modern; if anything, an audience watching Oedipus’ sufferings (namely, being widowed, blinded, and kept under house arrest) feels simultaneously horrified and comforted by the fact that it is happening to someone else completely unlike real people.

Perhaps kings in tragedy are meant to be headstrong and reluctant to take advice. Part of Sophocles’ project might be to show why democracy is best, and how rule by an absolute monarch like Oedipus cannot work, precisely because the personality of one individual can seriously undermine the safety of the state. Such were the traditional criticisms of monarchy that appeared throughout Athenian literature, most notably in Herodotus 3.80-84, where the Persian nobles debate which constitution—monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—would be best for Persia. Otanes argues against monarchy, since a king is susceptible to pride and envy and becomes jealous of the most virtuous men, even of the fact that they are alive (3.80.4); and kings can put men to death without trial (3.80.5). Similarly, Oedipus’ reliance on his own bad judgment and paranoia leads him in the *OT* to the brink of condemning his own brother-in-law Creon to death—something which one would hope would not happen in an Athenian democracy.

Then again, is Oedipus’ headstrongness justified? Perhaps Oedipus’ suspicions are right.

6 Euripides, it could be argued, achieves the complementary opposite with his ‘bad women’ such as Medea, Phaedra, and Hecuba from her name play: forcing us, his audience, to question the moral integrity of women for whom we had initially been led to sympathise.

How many readers have ever wondered whether Creon is actually conspiring against him? When Oedipus accuses him of this, Creon gives his famous argument that he has no desire to take Oedipus' place as king since he, Creon, as the king's brother-in-law, enjoys all the pleasures of kingship without the burden of the title itself (583ff.). In this context, Creon uses the word *sôphronein*, the verb derived from *sôphrosunê*; this is the only instance in the whole play where the concept is mentioned explicitly. Creon pleads that the man who knows *sôphronein* (i.e. how to have *sôphrosunê*) recognises that it is easier and preferable to do what kings do without being the king (589). This is akin to saying, he is perfectly happy to be the deputy prime minister, and not the P.M. Creon is satisfied being an assistant who runs errands—go to Delphi and check the oracle, and fetch some coffee while you're at it. A former professor of mine, Nathan Greenberg of Oberlin College, once jokingly suggested that, well, maybe it is possible that Creon is the kind of guy who likes fetching coffee. There are such people in the world! In general, however, Creon's arguments do not convince Oedipus, and perhaps they should not convince an audience. It is also rather suspicious—and a little too convenient—that Creon is the person who takes power in Thebes at the end of the *OT*, once Oedipus has blinded himself. Frederick Ahl, in his book *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction* (published in 1991), argues that Creon really does want Oedipus' throne and manipulates Oedipus into angry and rash assumptions from the beginning. So, even if Oedipus reads like a paranoid ruler, perhaps in the context of this play, there is a real reason for him to be paranoid. It might be that politics in Thebes do not warrant *sôphrosynê*.

Women

Assessors have read many student essays which argue endlessly how awful life was for women in ancient Greece, and how Greek tragedy shows how women suffered, how they were treated like property, second-class citizens, no better than slaves, etc. The *OT* is an interesting test case against these kinds of assumptions about gender. Readers must remember that what happens in Greek tragedy is not real; tragedy is a fiction, and the characters in tragedy are kings and queens from mythology. Greek tragedy cannot be assumed to be explicitly informative of what life was like for women in the ancient world; rather, it is much more appropriate and useful to speak of *representations* of women. What Greek tragedy offers is what the male author Sophocles and his male audience at the ancient theatre expected the role of women to be within a play. Even the famous speech of Euripides' Medea to her chorus of Corinthian female neighbours about the miserable lot of women says less about the real lives of Athenian woman than it does about how fictional Euripidean women operate. Certainly these expectations were connected with general ideals of real women's role in society, which we can glean from elsewhere in literature, such as the famous passage from Thucydides 2.45, the end of Pericles' funeral oration, where Pericles speaks to the widows of Athens and tells them that the greatest glory a woman can achieve is to be least talked about by men. In that context, the ideal woman is one who is not gossiped about by men, and one who does not put herself into the position where men can see her, so that the ideal woman stays at home and does not see men other than her husband or male relatives. Many scholars, such as Helene Foley and Patricia Easterling, have taken these ideal concepts to task, arguing for instance that women had many legitimate reasons for going out of doors, such as fetching

water from springs or attending religious festivals which required them to be looked at (Foley), and that when women in tragedy appear out of the house, it is often to do things that Greek culture expects them to do, such as lament a relative (Easterling). But Daniel Mendelsohn has recently made the excellent observation:

While this disagreement is of considerable importance to those whose project is to recreate the lived experience of men and women in fifth-century Athens, it need not impinge on any attempt to use unwritten social conventions as a framework for interpreting literary works such as these plays. Indeed, since my interest is in the dramatic function and symbolic meaning of those codes and the violations of them, the (admittedly) unwritten laws regulating interaction between men and women need *only* have operated rhetorically, as a number of scholars have argued they did.

(Mendelsohn, 40)

In the *OT*, however, things are a little different. The only female character is Jocasta. In the ancient world, of course, she would have been played by a man dressed in women's costume and wearing a woman's mask. As far as her character goes, she is unique in tragedy because her entrance at line 634 is unproblematic. No one chastises her for coming outside the house; no one blames her for appearing in public in front of a chorus of men; no one talks down to her; if anything, she has authority. She stops her brother Creon and her husband Oedipus from fighting with each other, and there seems nothing odd in the fact that she carries on a long conversation with her husband out in the open, in the public gaze, instead of retiring immediately into the house. This is a play, not real life, so an audience should not expect people in a play to act exactly like real ancient Greeks. It is important for Jocasta to stay outside, so the audience can hear her conversation with Oedipus, otherwise there would be no play. Furthermore, even if we allow for verisimilitude, Jocasta is the queen, with a social status far above normal women which might allow her to do as she pleases.

Nonetheless, there are some other scenes in the play where Jocasta's gender becomes an issue. When the Messenger from Corinth arrives, and Oedipus learns that he is not the child of King Polybus of Corinth, but was instead saved as an infant that was pierced in its ankles, Jocasta stands next to him, puts the jigsaw pieces together and realises in horror that he is her son, even though Oedipus has not figured it out yet. Jocasta tries to prevent Oedipus from probing the secret of his birth any further, and Oedipus—strangely enough—presumes that Jocasta is worried about what will be revealed about his social status:

Oedipus: Buck up; even if I am shown to be thrice slave and born of a thrice-slave mother, you will not be shown to be of low birth.

[...]

Jocasta: Oh miserable man! May you never learn who you are!

Oedipus: Won't someone go and bring the shepherd to me here?

As for her, let her find joy in her rich family!

Jocasta: *Iou, iou*, unfortunate man! This is the only thing I can call you, and the very last thing ever.

Chorus: Why has your wife gone, Oedipus, darting away in deep grief? I am afraid that

from this silence, misfortunes will break out.

Oedipus: Break out what will; I at least
shall be willing to see my lineage, even if it is lowly.

Perhaps she—for, like a woman, she thinks prideful thoughts—
is ashamed of my low birth.

(*OT* 1062f., 1068-79)

This is an excellent example of ‘cross-gender miscommunication’, a term used by sociolinguists to describe how men and women fail to communicate with each other because they have opposite expectations from certain speech patterns.⁷ In *Oedipus*’ case, his expectations of Jocasta’s speech are corrupted by his skewed assumptions about her interests as a woman. *Oedipus* assumes Jocasta is prideful (literally, she ‘thinks great’, *phronei mega*) about her royal ancestry, even though there has been no indication in the play that she behaves like this. Admittedly, throughout Greek literature, there is a trope that a woman with a rich dowry can control her husband (cf. Euripides’ *Andromache* 147-53, and fragment 775 of his *Phaethon*). Since when *Oedipus* married Jocasta, she had already been established as the queen in Thebes, maybe he presumes now she is thinking like a rich woman. But even more puzzling is the chorus’ response: why are they afraid that some misfortune will break out of ‘this silence’? Jocasta was not silent when she left; she was speaking loudly and clearly. Yet the Greek text does indeed use the word *siôpê*, ‘silence’. Does this mean the chorus men have paid no attention to what Jocasta said, and that they deliberately did not listen to her? Or that she spoke in riddles that they didn’t understand? I suspect that this is another instance in Greek tragedy where men are allowed to believe that women’s speech is inscrutable.⁸

When Jocasta dies, she goes straight to her marriage bed and bemoans her marriage to Laius, then she curses that bed where she ‘brought forth husband by her husband, children by her own child.’ (*OT* 1250). In this, Jocasta is very much like other women in tragedy. As Rush Rehm, Nicole Loraux, and Richard Seaford have shown, there is a constant conflation of marriage and death for women in tragedy. Eurydice from *Antigone* and Deianeira from *Women of Trachis* are two other Sophoclean tragic women who kill themselves over their marriage beds; in Euripides’ *Suppliants*, Evadne dresses like a bride and jumps into the funeral pyre of her husband Capaneus. The sacrifice of female virgins (Iphigenia, Polyxena from Euripides’ *Hecuba*, Macaria from Euripides’ *Children of Heracles*) and the entombment of virgins (Antigone) are traditionally described as ‘marriages to death’. In Greek tragedy, marriage is considered the defining state of a woman’s life, the proper final phase of a woman’s maturity, and virgins who are killed before they could marry in life are allowed to achieve that mature status through a figurative marriage to death. Jocasta’s case is ironic and doubly tragic; it is marriage itself which has destroyed her, both her marriage to Laius which produced a son, and the marriage to that very son. So that institution which is the proper final

7 For example, if women routinely ask questions as a means of continuing a conversation, and men ask questions to solicit advice, then when a woman asks a man a question over the dinner table, will the man take it as an opportunity to give his expert opinion, though the woman did not intend to solicit it? If the man then asks the woman questions for advice, and she treats them as cues for more conversation, will the man lose respect for her opinions? Proponents of what is called the Two Cultures Theory argue that men and women have different childhood experiences, are raised to fulfil opposite social roles, and do not share the same approaches to the role of language and discourse in society. See Nancy Henley & Cheris Kramarae’s ‘Gender, Power and Miscommunication’.

8 Cf. the Iphis and Evadne scene in Euripides’ *Suppliants*, the Clytemnestra and Achilles scene in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*; and (though more explainable) Cassandra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.

phase of a woman's maturity has always been Jocasta's greatest curse. It is not only Oedipus who comes to a knowledge of the self in this play; Jocasta does, too. She comes to know who she really is and what she is really involved in: *incest*.

It is significant, then, that in the off-stage narrative of her suicide, the last mention of Jocasta is a final incestuous glance at her body. Oedipus chooses the brooches from Jocasta's gown as the instruments of his blinding; if the brooches hold together Jocasta's gown and are removed, her gown would fall off to some degree, even though her corpse is prostrate on the floor. So what is the last sight Oedipus ever sees? He ensures that it is the very thing—his mother's nakedness—for having seen which, his eyes deserve destruction.

Conclusions

This article has focused on four basic themes that often emerge in school essays and examinations for which the *OT* is a selected text-in-translation: fate, vision & knowledge, *sôphrosunê*, and gender. I read Sophocles' masterpiece as an exploration of Oedipus' reversal of fortune in one day: how the self-made king of Thebes, in the course of an afternoon, is orphaned (figuratively of Polybus, literally of Jocasta), widowed, and maimed. Yet this *peripeteia* is not the direct or immediate result of the parricide and incest that Oedipus was 'fated' to commit, but rather the outcome of obtaining the knowledge—the self-discovery—of having committed those crimes in the (by now) distant past. Oedipus achieves this against considerable odds: first Tereisias, then the shepherd reveal that they know Oedipus' secret, and have known it for some time. How many other people in Thebes have known all along that Oedipus murdered Laius and married his mother?⁹

At the same time, I read Oedipus' character as essentially dislikeable precisely because of his intensely rash and offensive personality: rather paranoid, quick to offend and hasty to assume conspiracies—an attitude further complicated by the fact that he might be justifiably paranoid. I agree with Frederick Ahl that Creon and Teiresias may indeed be plotting against Oedipus. Certainly we should not be tricked into empathising with Creon as Oedipus' poor whipping boy, since Creon's appeal to *sôphronein* sounds specious, and at the end of the play, he comes into the very power he had so demonstrably and so publicly despised. Nor should we read Teiresias in black-and-white terms as the righteous but abused servant of Apollo, perpetually unhappy about his panoptic vision of the past and future—a kind of male Cassandra, or what Cassandra would be like if she were a crusty old man. Instead, Teiresias' initial reluctance to reveal what he, in fact, does know concerning of the murder of Laius and the cause of the present plague, is suspicious. Why wouldn't Teiresias be willing to help the greater community by telling the truth? What would he have to fear from Oedipus, since he shows none in the scene with him? His reticence appears more calculated to manipulate Oedipus into anger, to which Teiresias could then justifiably blurt out his knowledge in retaliation, and set some terribly chain of events in motion.

That is to say, none of the male characters of the play are morally uncomplicated, and neither Creon nor Teiresias plays a convincing moral foil to the abusive Oedipus. Sophocles

⁹ Frankly, we should be surprised; concealing the details of the murder of one's king surely counts as treason. Admittedly, Jocasta says the shepherd who witnessed Laius' murder came home to find Oedipus in power, and would understandably have been reluctant to accuse the new king. But what reasons would Teiresias have to conceal his knowledge all this time?

invents a Thebes that is governed and guided by despicable men, and invites us to watch how they manage a crisis. Sophocles then adds Jocasta to this formula, in some ways unlike other women in tragedy, in other ways just like them. He demonstrates how she exercises subtle control over these men in power, yet is completely powerless herself when it comes to the disastrous truth of her own existence. Her status as woman puts Oedipus' thinking powers to the test, and his inability to read his own wife as 'Jocasta' (who speaks for Oedipus' good) rather than as 'woman' (who speaks in her own interests) is symptomatic of his ongoing inability to read himself and translate the truth.

At the end of a play which began with scene after scene of men fighting with each other, we are compelled to watch the king whose attitude made us all bristle, suddenly find himself the most wretched man imaginable: sightless, sceptreless, bereft of parents, partner, and people. We experience what it is like to feel genuine pity for a man so unlike ourselves, a man who annoyed or even offended us. We learn that even people who are not to our liking are still human, and they can suffer terrible misfortunes through no fault of their own. Worst of all, we realise that it could happen to us; not that we will all kill our fathers and marry our mothers, but that—in a more figurative sense—the day might come when, through no fault of our own, we are transformed into the most miserable person we can think of, bereft of whatever is dear to us, alienated from those things which signify one's status as *olbios*. And as we witness this 'otherness'—these sensations of unexpected compassion for a man so 'other' than ourselves, and fear about experiences so 'other' from our own insular existences—we embrace a greater knowledge of ourselves, our identities, and our possibilities.

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Videos

I know of three performances of the *OT* on video. These are performances of the Sophocles play, not film adaptations (such as Pier Paolo Pasolini) or operatic adaptations (such as Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*...although the video of the Seiji Ozawa production of this opera is spectacular, and the suicide of Jocasta—sung by Jessye Norman—is unforgettable).

Oedipus Rex. Trans. William Butler Yeats; dir. Sir Tyrone Guthrie. Starring Douglas Campbell, Eleanor Stuart, Douglas Rain. Originally released as a motion picture, by Corinth Films, 1957.

Oedipus the King. Trans. and dir. Don Taylor. Starring Michael Pennington as Oedipus, John Shrapnel as Creon, John Gielgud as Teiresias, Claire Bloom as Jocasta. A BBC-TV Co-Production with Bioscope, Inc., 1986. Distributed in North America by Films for the Humanities and Sciences (www.films.com). If you're ever in the USA, buy a copy.

Oedipus the King. Trans. and dir. Harry Love. Starring Ralph Johnson, Marilyn Parker, Andrew Connolly, Harry Love. Presented by the Department of Classics, University of Otago (Dunedin, NZ) and Classic Productions. Distributed in Australia by Classroom Video, Bayview, NSW; Marcom Projects, Loganholme, Qld. 1994.